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INTRODUCTIONS

HERBERT HOWELLS



It was a custom with the old Italian painters to set the persons they depicted against a background of familiar yet lovely landscape. In making this Introduction between Herbert Howells and Members of the B.M.S. - (if indeed one can be said to make an introduction when the protagonists are already on friendly terms with each other!) - I propose to present him against ^{the a} background ^{that} which seems most relevant ~~with regard~~ to himself and most significant in relation to his work - in short, the landscape of his native Gloucestershire. Born at Lydney on the Severn, he came naturally ^{by} into an inheritance of beauty. Hill, sky, cloud, river, "blossomy ^{*} ~~flower-spread~~ plain" - all these things are Gloucestershire, and behind them ~~is~~ ^{glimpjes} one sees the succession of centuries flowing down from the mists of Celtic times in an almost unruffled and ever-widening intellectual tide. Many races ~~in earlier times~~ mingled their strains in the making of England. Gloucestershire ~~is~~ ^{However But} a microcosm of the whole. ~~But~~ ^{Seems} there ~~is~~ ^{believe} reason to ~~think~~ ^{that} the Romans left here a deeper mark, and one less obliterated by ^{subsequent} ~~later~~ invasions than in ~~any~~ ^{other} places ~~elsewhere~~. ~~What to~~ ^{of the} ~~than in many other places. Does any sign remain today of that to link it~~ Second Legion with its proud title ~~of~~ Augusta (Royal) which occupied Gloucester ^{for so long} ~~for three centuries~~ and watched the marches of Wales? Maybe. It is a ~~very~~ strange coincidence that two learned authori-

ties on ethnography - quite unknown to each other and on two ~~distinct~~ ^{separate} occasions singled out Herbert Howells and his brother as perfect types of Italian Celts.

Gloucestershire had other gifts to bestow. It possessed the oldest Choral Festival in England, and the whole country side ~~was~~ steeped in choral music. When in 1912 Howells won an Open Scholarship for Composition at the Royal College of Music, (where he is now on the teaching staff), he astonished everyone during his first term by composing a Mass in the Dorian Mode for Sir Charles Stanford, which far from being a mere student's exercise, was so beautiful and appropriate that before many weeks ~~had~~ passed it had found its way into performance at Westminster Cathedral. ~~This was the more ^{surprising} remarkable because hitherto the Modes and the Roman Ritual were unknown to Howells, his experience having lain with the Anglican ritual at Gloucester Cathedral and with the Male Voice Choirs of the Forest of Dean.~~

His aptitude however was by no means confined to choral music. ~~During his scholarship at the R.C.M. He~~ quickly proved adept in orchestral and chamber music. ~~Even Then,~~ ^{even} as now, he presented the interesting problem of a composer who not only differentiates his technical methods to suit ~~the~~ different types of music, but who is himself different when he deals with them. He seems actually to tap different systems of ideas according to the ~~types of~~ work he has in hand. While his instrumental scores are generally rich textures of independent, and often beautifully

arabesqued parts, woven together ^{into a brilliant} ~~to a close felt~~, closely reasoned and ~~sometimes~~ (it must be confessed) ^{occasionally} ~~too complex though brilliant~~ whole, his Choral works - above all, his unaccompanied choral works to Latin words, move in a region of pure serene, with clarity, space, unfretted contours and a warm graciousness of effect quite ~~extraordinary~~ ^{his own} remarkable.

Since his Choral music first gave the measure of his powers, and since it ^{still} remains one of the most significant branches of his art, I propose to speak of it in some detail, - the more so because at the present time it is the department least known to the public. An introduction does seem necessary when such works as his Four Anthems of the Blessed Virgin Mary (composed in response to a request from Sir Richard Terry) have never been heard outside Westminster Cathedral, and his (big) Ballad for Chorus and Orchestra 'Sir Patrick Spens' (one of his best things) has never been heard at all. It is true they are hard and call for good singing but ^{what is that} when such choirs exist as the Glasgow Orpheus, the Newcastle Bach Choir, the London Oriana, or the Leeds and Birmingham Festival Choirs?

I have already indicated that Howells' Choral music falls naturally into two divisions according to whether the words are English or Latin. He says himself the sound of the Latin always moves him in an extraordinary and unaccountable way, and he can compose to Latin with a freedom and warmth he hardly ever feels with English. The ^{results} ~~points~~ bear out the feeling. His Mass 'Sine Nomene' (now labelled Op.2), his eight part 'Nunc Dimittis', the

Four Anthems of the B.V.M., the 'Te Lucis' and ~~among his most~~
 a recent and ^{not} yet ~~not~~ fully ^{finished Twelve part} ~~published works,~~ a Choral Setting of
 a Mediaeval poem ^{that} ~~which~~ is a mixture of Latin and English, place
 him alongside the best British composers of a Cappella music, ~~not~~
~~only of the present day but of any day.~~ His treatment of the in-
 dividual parts, the continuous flowering of fresh melodic curves
 from one another, their combination during their onward flow into
 beautiful and appropriate harmonies, is as modestly masterful in
 manner as Byrde, as flexible as Whyte. But Howells brings also to
 his work a modern grasp of design. Such things as the 'Salve
 Regina' and the great Easter anthem from his Four Anthems of the
 B.V.M. delight one by this added beauty. Moreover, he has no
 hesitation in ^{using} harmonic methods beyond those of the Modes, -
 he is neither academic nor pedantic, ~~if he wants to use an enhar-~~
~~monic modulation, he does~~ ^{so} ~~witness the exquisite change in the~~
~~'Salve Regina' on the words 'Ad te suspiramus gementes'~~

His unaccompanied compositions to English words are
 more austere in mould, colder in tint. Several have ~~a~~ marked skill
 and beauty and have brought him ~~various~~ honour - (for instance
 prizes from the Madrigal Society in 1915 and 1918), ^{but} I confess I
 think those ^{works} ^{best} in which the words approximate most nearly to
 the Latin, or at any rate, to the Mediaeval atmosphere. The three
 Carol Anthems, 'Here is the Little Door', 'A Spotless Rose' and
 'Sing Lullaby' are singularly lovely, and afford examples of ~~the~~
~~Howells' command of flexible rhythm and the sensitive beauty of~~

in which Howells excels.

~~the~~ melodic line. ¹ The simple, ~~yet~~ ^{about it} highly finished design of 'A Spotless Rose' ~~there is~~ ^{has} something ~~indeed~~ ^{heard or} that is difficult to describe in words, but which when ¹ seen ~~or heard~~ upon the pages of the score raises an ~~vague~~ ^{insistent} sense of its kinship with the designs of Celtic art during the great period, ~~hundreds of years ago.~~ Howells' tendency towards Rhapsody or Fantasy Form as a

~~rather~~ ^{mode} of expression seems to furnish another instance ^{of this} Celtic strain.

From some early Rhapsodies for Violin solo, through his Folk Phantasy String Quartet, his three Rhapsodies for Organ Solo, his Rhapsodic Quintet for Clarinet and Strings, and other smaller works, up to the new 'Pastoral Rhapsody' for Orchestra produced this Spring at the Eastbourne and Bournemouth Festivals there is abundant evidence of his ease ^{and mastery} and eloquence in a form where many composers involuntarily become square-cut and symphonic. ~~in style.~~ He does not always escape the danger ~~A danger is that he sometimes leaves an impression of indefiniteness by the~~ ^{due to} ~~very~~ spontaneous flow of his ideas ~~one after the~~ ^{but at his best he combines} ~~this~~ ^{unstudied} ~~wealth of~~ freedom with an equally firm hold upon design on a large scale.

Of accompanied Choral work he has not - so far - done much. ^{However,} ^{but} ¹ though there ~~is~~ ^{be} not ~~yet~~ ^{be} quantity, 'Sir Patrick Spens' for Chorus and Orchestra, supplies the quality. The rugged splendour of the poem, ^{evoked} ~~the mysterious beauty of its lines evoked~~ from him a work ^{surging} ~~singing~~ with an energy like that of Northern seas ^{the} ~~themselves~~ ¹ the musical ^{ideas welling} ~~thoughts~~ ¹ sprung from the ~~same~~ source ~~as~~ Folk Song, yet ^{their} ~~thoroughly~~ modern and ~~thoroughly~~ individual in ~~style.~~ Who but

Howells, ^{for instance,} ~~for instance,~~ would have thought of setting the ~~change~~ difficult catalogue of the mariners ways of 'wapping' the ship to a melody of extreme loveliness?

This affinity for Folk Song forms ^{a song clear} ~~another~~ strand in his ~~complex musical~~ temperament. It has ~~often~~ been to the fore in some of his most lovable things. His Piano Quartet in A minor, which was (the first work published under the Carnegie Awards), has for its ^{strength} ~~heart~~ a theme ^{which} ~~that~~ appears first as the Second Subject of ~~the~~ the First movement, and ^{which} subsequently colours the whole work. It is practically a perfect folk tune: ^{but} ~~of~~ his own composition. ~~'The Chosen Tune' too (for Violin with Piano accompaniment) is Folk Song raised to its highest melodic power - comparable to the Irish 'Londonderry Air'.~~

The Folk-element ^{crops out} ~~appears~~ in some of his songs but here more often with a ^{raucously rough} ~~rough~~ tang, as in 'The Mugger's Song', ^{Wilson} ~~the~~ words by Wilfrid ~~Walter~~ Gibson. or in 'Mally O', a setting of a Jacobite poem. ^{for} ~~But~~ ^{rest} ~~the bulk of~~ his songs ^{present a wide variety,} ~~are developed on other methods, and present a wide variety.~~ Fairly constant features in all are a justice ^{to} ~~of~~ Rhythmic and inflexional declamation akin to that practised by the Elizabethan Lutenist song writers, and an accompaniment which not only supplies a ~~clean~~ carefully calculated line of background but ^{to bear} ~~which~~ also brings ~~in~~ an intellectual commentary or expression of the words from an instrumental point of view - the accompanist becoming a sort of collaborator. Occasionally ~~in this or that song~~ one wishes for a more definite

'bel canto' treatment, and sometimes the intellectual conception
 of ~~the~~ the accompaniment is one which cannot fully realize itself in
 this restricted medium, ~~(as in the remarkable 'Rondel of Rest')~~,
 but in such things as 'The Restful Branches', 'The First Group of
 Songs from Peacock Pie', ~~and~~ ^{and} many others, ⁱⁿ above all in 'King David'
 a truly wonderful setting of a poem by ~~Walter~~ de la Mare the songs
 yield a delight which ~~steadily~~ increases the better one knows them.
~~since the appropriateness, refinement, and intellectual strength~~
~~of the musical designs are invariable.~~ Nor do they lack humour,
~~when~~ ~~where occasion offers.~~ A Puckish humour indeed peeps out in many
 of ^{Howells'} ~~his~~ works, big and small: - ~~for instance~~ in the 'Dance of the
 Sleepy Gollywogs' in Lady Audrey's Suite for String Quartet, in
 the 'Snapshots' for Piano, in his early Suite for Full Orchestra
 'The B.s' (the title of which does not refer to the alphabet or
 humble bees, but to ^{fine} ~~fine~~ friends of student days whose nicknames
 all began with B) and most of all in that dainty orchestral piece
 'Puck's Minuet' which has been played so much and won so many friends
 that it has ^{fairly} ~~literally~~ put a girdle round the earth! 'Procession'
 = another short piece for orchestra, shows ^{a different} ~~another~~ aspect of
 Howells' ~~versatile~~ ^{being} resourceful orchestration, ~~for~~ everything
 here ^{is} worked towards one terrific crescendo.

This tendency to work towards a ^{big} ~~great~~ melodic climax
~~climax in a movement~~ is a frequent feature in Howells' later
 orchestral and Chamber works. One of the clearest examples ^{occurs} ~~is~~
 in the Pastoral Rhapsody already referred to; another in the new-

ly finished Sonatine in E minor for Violin and Piano. These works - (like his ~~beautiful~~ ^{beautiful}, reserved, yet ~~deeply felt~~ Quartet, 'In Gloucestershire') have come into being as his reactions to certain landscapes. ^{"Mehr} 'Ausdruck als Malerei', they have occasioned some perplexity on their first hearing. Howells seldom helps people by explanation or self-justification. His attitude is that of Sir Walter Scott - 'I do not rhyme to that dull elf, Who cannot image to himself' But ~~there is~~ ^{exists} a logical basis for even the most unexpected features of his works. The Rhapsody presents ~~in~~ ^{as} its opening section the inner thoughts called into play by Gloucestershire, ~~then in~~ ^{depicts} the middle section the exterior world of action ^{and} with the intense activity of the countryside, and ~~finally the~~ ^{for the end a return is} world of thought, ~~again for the end~~ ^{out}. The Sonatine, especially the savage harmonies in the First movement, is the outcome of a trip to the Canadian Rockies last summer.

^{made to the} ~~Though~~ ^{an analysis} ~~Harriet~~ Howells is still a young man - (he was born in 1892) ~~a close study~~ of his works induces the belief ~~that~~ he has set one period behind him in the decade 20 to 30, and is now entering a new phase of development. He always had great natural technique. At the present moment he can focus on any style ~~in past or present musical practice~~ he desires and employ it for the expression of his ideas, but some inner impulse, a restlessness he cannot ~~even~~ ^{even} explain to himself seems driving him ~~steadily~~ forward to explore ~~fresh~~ fields from which he may not reap an immediate harvest of popular acclaim but which may yield

something new and valuable to music.

~~In~~ The foregoing pages ~~have~~ ^{attempted} ~~been~~

to indicate

~~Some~~ of his characteristics, ~~have been touched on~~ viz. his extraordinary affinity with ^{the} Latin, the Celtic type of design towards which he tends when embellishing a passage, his innate sympathy with Folk Song, his strong natural attachment to the countryside, particularly ^{under} its pastoral aspects, his spontaneous intimacy with Tudor thought in music, ~~his intuitive understanding of children~~ - all these can be related to each other and to him as a son of Gloucestershire. But there is one characteristic perhaps more significant than all the rest - his unpredictable moments. Here and there in his scores, at certain crises of exalted thought, something emerges which belongs to the universal, the ^{undeniable} ~~imperishable~~ beauty.. Such a moment occurs in the Slow Movement of the Piano Quartet in A minor: there is another just before the Coda of the 'Pastoral Rhapsody'. These are the moments which make one ^{confident} ~~sure~~ that whatever may be the experimental stages of Howells' ~~career~~ latest development, wherever may lie his exploratory path, he will not fail ^{to find his way to the ~~desired~~ treasures of fresh} ~~less his way nor fail to find fresh treasures of beauty, for~~ like a good navigator he has 'got his bearing onto a star', and ^{and as steady hand as he helm, and natural brave} confidence in the seas should surely never fail one so born to the element.